

Learning beyond prescribed outcomes – APEL as a vehicle of transformational learning for mid-term professionals undertaking a further degree in professional studies (0175)

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Introduction

There has been a consistent theme within the literature of adult and professional education that prescribed learning outcomes, whilst playing a pivotal role in the maintenance of quality in training provision, do not and should not limit the learning which is achieved (Brookfield 1986). Indeed,

'the unintended consequences of a learning situation are often much more important than the original restrictive catechism of goals which invariably assumes an instrumental role of learning'
(Jones 1982; 168)

The veracity of this view became apparent for the author whilst reading the reflective essays produced by candidates on a Professional Doctorate/Masters programme within a UK university. When asked to identify the learning they had achieved through preparing a claim for prior and experiential learning (an APEL claim) the candidates identified impacts that on first analysis went beyond those identified within the learning outcomes of the module and indeed could be identified as transformational in nature. This paper represents a short exploration of the previous literature on the developmental aspects of APEL claims; the transformational learning which can result as illustrated by the experience of candidates; and asks whether such as leaning review is an appropriate addition to the design of professional learning at this level.

APEL and Transformational Learning

In a recent review (Scott, 2010) the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) was identified as 'a pedagogy that is over-theorized and under-practiced'. Originally it was designed as an innovative route for the assessment of learning derived from an individual's life experience so it could be acknowledged and included within their degree programme. Uptake has been lower than initially envisaged for a variety of reasons (Hargreaves 2006) not least the difficulties in recognising the specific 'subject-based' learning required for traditional degrees. In contrast, its use within Work Based Learning (WBL) programmes to recognise general learning (Armsby, Costley and Garnett 2006) is more established and has become an integral part of many such negotiated degrees (Boud and Solomon 2001).

In the programmes considered here the process of APEL is 'developmental' as opposed to a 'credit exchange' (Butterworth 1992) and requires the candidate to review their learning through writing of a reflective portfolio. The learning of the candidates is assumed to extend beyond the instrumental/technical and is made explicit through guided critical reflection and evaluation of prior experience leading to new meanings, understanding and subsequent behaviour. It is this emphasis on critical reflection within the process that provides the opportunity for transformational learning (Mezirow 1991).

How transformational learning can be fostered has been the focus of enquiry for a number of years (Taylor, 2007) leading to the identification of a number of critical enablers such as: direct experience; availability of various mediums for exploration of learning e.g. journaling; the importance of pedagogical entry points and the nature and importance of the support provided. The programme design used within this review of learning module provides a number of these enablers.

Design and Candidate Experience of the Programme

Within this programme the candidates are invited to consider their learning in relation to their professional context, values, beliefs and aspirations and to explore this through either a 5,000 word critically reflective account of learning (for Doctorate candidates) or a reflective portfolio of learning themes including a 2,000 word reflective essay (for Masters candidates). The aim of the submission was to provide a vehicle for APEL claims but also to enable an exploration by the candidate of their ontological and epistemic viewpoint in preparation for their future research work.

The candidates formed learning sets of six operating within the general principals of action learning (Revans 1982), meeting on a monthly basis for 4 hours during one semester and supported by a learning advisor/facilitator using a coaching framework (Gray 2006). The facilitators acted as 'empathetic provocateurs' (Cranton 1992; 17) encouraging a critical examination of learning experience and the assumptions that underlie them. Within the Master degree Learning Set the candidates were all mid-term professional veterinary surgeons with a well established practice, either as practice owners or as senior partners within practice. The seniority and breadth of experience was such that one had attained high office within their professional body and another had a significant clinical publication record. All candidates submitted portfolios that passed assessment for the module. The reflective essays for the Master degree Learning Set were analysed using a basic thematic analysis after ethical permission was given by the candidates.

Two themes were immediately apparent:

Firstly; the candidates experienced significant difficulty in moving away from a focus on evidencing achievement to one of reflection upon learning.

'If I'm honest my initial impression of the RAL(APEL) module was a mixture of the facile and incomprehensible'

The second theme was the change in learning perspective that had occurred for each of the candidates

'To stop and carefully consider what has been learnt during this process and how this knowledge can be used to change what we do (as we have been frequently told – the evidence of learning is change) has required a revolutionary reappraisal of how we think. '

I feel that undertaking the RAL(APEL) module has been extremely helpful to me. It has made me feel more confident, and I believe that it will improve the way that I can work and learn in the future. I feel enlightened and stimulated. It has given a boost to my desire to learn and achieve more in the future. '

Conclusion

This group of candidates identified they had achieved significant benefit from the opportunity to pause and critically reflect upon their learning to date. Programme design factors such as the opportunity for empathic support and reflective dialogue have been previously identified as encouraging transformational learning through a form of meta-reflection where the candidates not only see the world more clearly but see themselves seeing the world. It is of note that such a transformative learning experience was seen as novel by the candidates although they were seasoned practitioners of some professional standing. This suggests facilitated critical reflective reviews of prior learning could be beneficial within the design of lifelong learning programmes for the professions.

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